

# The county home's future

## How to handle the burden of rising costs

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*In the last of a three part series on Sullivan County Health Care, the nursing home in Unity, the Eagle Times explore what lies ahead for the home and whether the facility can handle rising costs while continuing to provide complete care. Part I and part II of the series are on our Web site [www.eagletimes.com](http://www.eagletimes.com)*

Predicting the future has many pitfalls including being dead wrong, but as the cost of health care continues to rise at nearly an exponential rate, it is almost certain that taxpayers will be asked to foot more of the bill as government subsidies continue to be reduced.

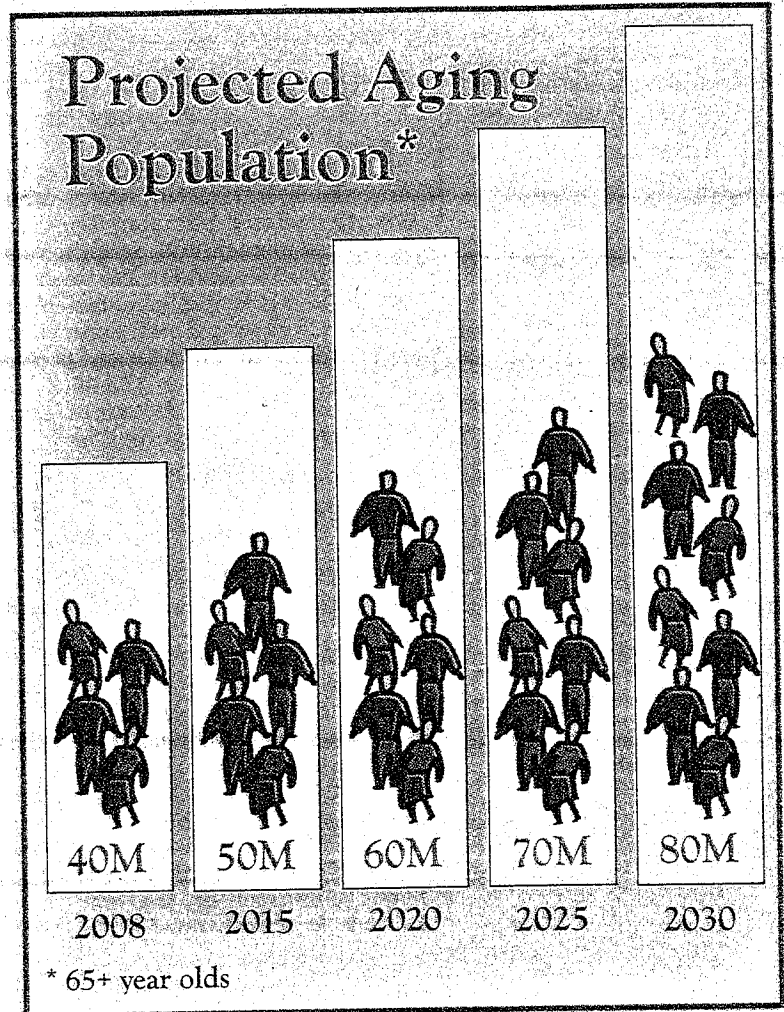
But one thing is certain—the cost to house a person at Sullivan County Health Care will continue to rise, but exactly by how much is anybody's guess.

Twenty years ago when the cost per week per resident at the home was \$81, it was unthinkable that by 2008 the cost would have jumped to \$1,365. If the current trend continues, in 2030 that cost could skyrocket even more.

Over the same period of time, the nursing home budget has doubled to \$11 million. With current trends, the budget can be expected to break the \$20 million mark within the next two decades.

Most of this cost will be offset from payments by the government through Medicare and Medicaid and by private health insurance. The remainder will be the burden of the county taxpayer.

If everything remains the same and residents still wish to take care of the elderly in the community, there is little doubt they will need to dig a little deeper into their pockets. With an estimated 80 million Americans aged 65 or



older living in the country by 2030, the need for elderly health care does not appear to be going away anytime soon.

According to the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention, the average life expectancy in the United States is at an all-time high of 77.9 years. This is an increase from 75.8 in 1995 and 69.6 in 1955.

County Commissioners Jeff Barrette, Ethel Jarvis and Ben Nelson agree that in the future there will still be a need for elderly care and that the need will surpass the county's current capacity.

"Within 10 years I think there will be a double-digit waiting list

for the nursing home," Jarvis said.

Although the nursing home is currently having difficulty filling its 156 beds, waiting lists are not uncommon as the nursing home has seen them in the past. According to county reports, the home ran at 100 percent capacity from the 1960s and well into the 1980s.

Director of nursing Becky Trudell agrees with the commissioners that there will be a greater need in the future and for some types of beds, there is an urgent need.

"I could have another Alzheimer's unit built and have it

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filled tomorrow," Trudell said.

The rooms at the home will also change with the influx of techno-savvy baby boomers. When the home first opened there were no private rooms as there are today. The rooms the county is currently working on will have private telephones and television making them more like a small apartment than a room in a health care facility.

"I think we're going to have to change the layout in the future," Jarvis said. "The rooms are going to be there, but they're going to be different."

But just how different will depend on the demands made by future residents who may want to chat on-line with their grandchildren or send happy birthday e-cards to all their relatives.

Administrator Ted Purdy gave one example of a resident who requested Internet services for his laptop.

"We installed wi-fi on that floor so he would have access to the Internet," Purdy said.

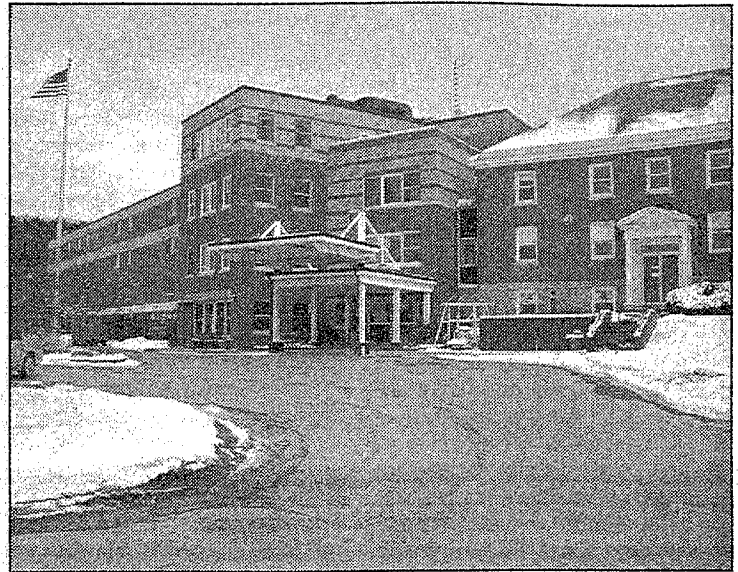
Technology will not just be used for entertainment in the future.

In Japan, for example, Matsushita Electric Industrial Co. opened the 103-room nursing home and filled it with devices carrying the company's brand names such as Panasonic, according to an Associated Press report.

For Matsushita, the home is a proving ground for the gadgets that can help those increasingly unable to help themselves.

The bathrooms, for example, have sensors on ceilings that notify the staff if a resident collapses. Each resident also carries an electronic device with a button that can be pushed to alert staffers on their cell phones at nursing stations.

Video cameras placed throughout the four-story building moni-



KARL TORNIO PHOTO

## Sullivan County Health Care in Unity faces an uncertain financial future

tor activity, and the doors that divide building sectors have electronic locks that require passwords.

For patients with dementia, there are beds with weight monitors linked to a computer network that automatically locks the door of the room if the bed is suddenly vacated. The monitors also come in handy when patients accidentally fall off their beds, allowing staffers to rush to their aid.

Technological updates to nursing homes cost money and how much to spend will surely be open for debate.

"If every new bed costs us another \$20,000 a year, that's going to require the tax base in the county to get behind us," Barrette said. "There is a need, but not everybody has the assets to pay."

In the past, three square meals a day, a bed, medical care and a place to shower was all that was provided for residents.

"It used to be that when someone came into the nursing home

they never left," Trudell said.

For some residents, the nursing home will be their last residence.

Marion Pelton said she is very pleased with her surroundings at the home.

"We have a good place here," Pelton said. "It has all the comforts of home. I would highly recommend it."

Trudell recalled one elderly resident who was dying. The resident's daughter was called, but couldn't make it to the home before her mother passed away. When she did arrive, the daughter was happy to see that there were several nurses surrounding her mother's bed.

"She was so happy to know that someone was there with her and she didn't die alone," Trudell said. "Quality of care is the most important thing for our residents. Sometimes we are their family."

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